

Bush a Hot Property on G.O.P. Dinner Circuit

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IDAHO FALLS, Idaho, Feb. 17—The millionaire company director and Houston banker with Yale and Peking in his background drove and flew and waited for nine hours just to get from Dayton, Ohio, to this city of about 40,000.

The point of his journey was not to eat Idaho russet potatoes or to listen to a 36-minute paean to Lincoln from a Congressman's formidable office manager. It was not even just to help an old friend, Senator James A. McClure, in an apparently easy race for re-election.

The message of George Bush's visit to the eastern Idaho Lincoln Day Dinner yesterday came in Mr. McClure's introduction of him to more than 300 party faithful as a man who "very well might be a candidate for the Presidency on the Republican ticket."

A year after leaving the post of Director of Central Intelligence, Mr. Bush is one of the hottest properties on the Republican dinner circuit, and introductions like Mr. McClure's are frequent. Mr. Bush makes no effort to deny an interest in the 1980 race, but he contends that basically he is reacquainting himself with politics after nonpartisan jobs and "paying my dues." Some might think his determined service as Republican national chairman as Watergate tumbled down on the party had already earned him an honored life membership.

After the introductions, his Republican audiences like him even more when he has told them that President Carter and his staff are "incompetent,"

that the Administration's human rights policy shows "hypocritical selectivity" in choosing the countries to criticize, that the Panama Canal treaties carry a message of weakness to the world and that it is time to stop attacks on the C.I.A. and the F.B.I.

He draws his experience into his speeches, which are well-spoken, with effectively timed punch lines. He says he knows that in the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation there were "a handful of abuses, most of them two decades ago," that they have been cleaned up, and that continued criticism is unfair to the "most unselfish and dedicated public servants in America today."

He cites his time as chief of the United States Liaison Office in China in his Panama Canal argument, saying that the Chinese wonder if the United States is firm and can be depended on, and that the treaties convey "a perception of United States impotence."

And there is one more key message, important not only to the party but also to someone who acknowledges that he would be "interested" in a Presidential bid, one with a basic appeal to conservatives but without the sharp edges that could compel rejection by the Eastern Republicans he

Mr. Bush said that while the party might be in tune with the "conservative heartbeat" of America, it could not prosper if it continually fought old internal battles. In Texas, he observed, the faithful are still disputing over the Eisenhower-Taft conflict of 1952. Nationally, he says, the party can no longer afford to worry over the Reagan-Ford fight of 1976. (With the enforced

neutrality of his C.I.A. post, Mr. Bush himself wounded no one in 1976.)

Although he is traveling heavily and working as chairman of the Republican's April 6 fund-raising dinners around the nation, Mr. Bush has little more than secretarial help for his personal political efforts. There are only local press releases for his appearances.

He is a director of six business concerns; the most time-consuming position is that of chairman of the executive committee of the First International Bank of Houston.

The 53-year-old Massachusetts native maintained in an interview that not holding public office meant that he was not obliged to have a detailed position on every public issue. He said, for example, that he did not know the contents of the leadership amendments to the Panama Canal treaties. Having heard them explained, he said, "It wouldn't be easy for me, but I would probably be opposed" in a vote.

Cites an Obstacle

If he were to run, he said, a major obstacle would be that he last won an election in 1968, to the House, and lost Senate races in Texas in 1964 and 1970. But he observed that anyone would have to win primaries in 1980 to succeed and that other hopefuls had also not won a general election in some time. He did not name them, but that group includes former President Gerald R. Ford, former Gov. Ronald Reagan of California, and a fellow Texan, John B. Connally.

For the time being, "keeping my options open," he said, involves a speaking schedule almost as heavy at times as he had when he was national chairman. From Feb. 8 to today, for example, he has appeared at party events in San Antonio; Tulsa, Okla.; Chicago; Rockford, Ill.; Akron, Ohio; Conroe, Tex.; Dayton, Ohio; Idaho Falls; Denver, and Colorado Springs.

Until he makes a final decision on whether he will become a Presidential candidate, Mr. Bush says he plans to be at work trying to elect other Republicans this year, among them a close friend, James A. Baker Jr., who was President Ford's 1976 campaign manager and who has a difficult race in a bid to be the first Republican attorney general of Texas.